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THE EVOLUTION OF THE BLUE-JACKET.

BY ADMIRAL P. H. COLOMB, ROYAL NAVY.

IT IS to be observed of all pictures representing the Arctic regions, that they are seldom true to nature : and this because it is always the exceptional, and never the ordinary, scene that is painted. In every part of the picture we have the icebergs running up with fantastic peaks and pinnacles, developing into graceful arches and airy columns. It is not to be said that such natural freaks are absent from every Arctic scene, but it is that they give a character to few Arctic scenes. Thus the ordinary aspect of the ice is scarcely picturesque, and something like a dull monotony of form characterizes the real iceberg.

I think that most probably what is true of the pictures we have of the Arctic regions is also true of those we have of the blue-jacket who won our battles for us in past times. What was picturesque, odd, eccentric, and therefore rare, about him was selected to give character to the scene, so that the extraordinary, instead of the ordinary, blue-jacket is the type of which we have the greatest knowledge. It has often struck me as a curious anomaly that Dibdin's songs were never sung by the blue-jackets of my early days, that is, the days of nearly fifty years ago. They had songs of their own—the "fore-bitter" of sixty or seventy verses, with a roaring chorus at the end of each ; or the sentimental solo describing the joys of wandering by river sides and in soft, green meadows with the maiden of your choice ; or, less frequently, the broad comic song, scarcely of a drawing room character. I reconciled the fact to my sense of the fitness of things by reflecting that Dibdin's blue-jacket was most probably a stage sort of character, interesting to the lay mind of England, but altogether unrepresentative of the real thing and rejected by the real thing for this reason.

There are not wanting here and there direct proofs of my view. I have among my books a curious and rare pamphlet, written at the very beginning of this century, descriptive of the inner life of a man-of-war of the day. It is in the form of dialogue. A Member of Parliament becomes the guest of the captain for a short cruise, and he carries on a conversation with the officers as the ship passes through a variety of situations, including, if I rightly recollect, getting ashore, and experiencing an alarm of fire on board. The Member never ceases to express his surprise at the misrepresentations current on shore as to the character and conduct of "the guardians of the deep," as they were to be seen in their floating houses. Everything the Member sees and hears shows order, discipline, temperance, delicacy of language—he never heard an oath—and kindness of thought and demeanor. If, again, we turn from hypothesis to reality, and remember the extraordinary good health which prevailed in the fleet under Nelson's command throughout his long and monotonous blockade of Toulon, it is hardly possible to associate it with the belief that his men were the rollicking, drunken (that is, much more so than society of the day), reckless creatures that have been popularly painted.

I, personally, am confirmed in my view from my own experience. I never served in a ship where there were not a few representatives of the picturesque but unmanageable devilry which has been handed down to us as the common character of the blue-jacket; and if I were to paint the general aspect of the crew in the colors proper to the exceptions, I should show that the blue-jacket of 1850 was a true descendant of him of 1800. I doubt not that at the time I write there are on board many of our ships specimens, probably very few in number, of the traditional type. But no one now would write about them or draw attention to their eccentricities as having in them anything to be amused at, still less to admire. Public opinion, on the lower deck as elsewhere, has changed its view of these things. Doubtless a blue-jacket, in the gradations from perfect sobriety to perfect drunkenness, does and says pretty nearly the same things now that he did and said ninety years ago. Fifty, forty, twenty years ago, perhaps, the comic side of the case would have been seen, and would have predominated in the minds of onlookers; now men would regard the case, not in its immediate, but in its future aspect. The

beginning of the drunkard's life, with all the horror and misery of it which was to come, would now be the dominating thought, and the idea of anything comic would be an impossible association. And so with any other variation from a fair standard of sensible conduct and morality. We may find it, but it no longer bears a picturesque appearance. No popular writer would speak of it as a necessary concomitant of loyal courage, in all cases to be excused, if not to be regarded with affectionate pity.

So, perhaps, it is this way with the evolution of the blue-jacket. Perhaps we should find that his main characteristics are unchanged and unchangeable; that there always was and always will be a minority with qualities eccentric and striking which were once thought to be picturesque and inherent in a "jolly tar," but which were really excrescences that time and enlightenment have worn away, so that now the minority is infinitesimal.

The blue-jacket, in short, always was what circumstances made him, and he always will be so. Most of the blue-jacket's surroundings have immensely changed in the course of this century; some of them it is impossible to change. His character has obeyed the impulses forced upon it.

It is too early yet to understand fully what the change from sail to steam may effect in the bluejacket's physique, but the change for the majority cannot be so great as might be inferred. A proportion of the blue-jackets of any fully rigged ship were necessarily athletes. The "upper yardmen" in a line-of-battle-ship or a frigate were exceptional men in this way, and much more so, perhaps, just about the time that sail power was receiving its death warrant than ever before. These young men had to race aloft to nearly the highest points, at top speed, eight or ten times a week when the ship was in harbor; to keep their heads and maintain their breath while "holding on by their eyelids," as the phrase went, and manipulating with a careful and measured order of action the various and intricate arrangements for "crossing" or "sending down" the royal and top-gallant yards. It was all done at full speed, for it was universally held that the upper yardmen gave a character to the whole ship; and that one which was foremost in this exercise was ever considered "the smartest ship in the fleet." These upper yardmen were always the coming men. They had most opportunities for distinguishing themselves, were the best known, and were most un-

der the eye of the authorities. They developed great muscular power in chest, shoulders and arms. Their lower extremities suffered, and one always knew the men who had been upper yardmen by their tadpole-like appearance when they were bathing.

But in the modern steam line-of-battle-ship and frigate these extremely athletic specimens formed a very small minority of the "ship's company," and none of them could lose his turn at being upper yardman so long as the ship's reputation depended on the speed with which the upper yards were crossed and sent down. In harbor the rest of the blue-jackets had the handling of yards and sails for exercise once or twice a week, but at sea the use of sails for propulsion grew less and less important, and most of the work aloft was more of an exercise and less of a necessity.

I am not at all sure that the year 1800 produced even the minority of athletes which our upper yard system was famous for in 1860. Any one examining the logs of any blockading fleet about the end of last century, can scarcely doubt the fact. The ships as a rule were kept under extremely low sail and were for days and days under the same sail, the "evolutions" being confined to "tacking" or "wearing," "per signal," five or six times in the twenty-four hours-mancœuvres which called for little work aloft. "It blew so much harder in the days of the war," that double or even treble reefs in the topsails were found co-existent with the ready passage of boats from ship to ship. There was then no such thing as "sail drill," the actual necessities of cruising being held all sufficient. Even in my own time, I have noted that the training of a minority of athletes was the work of steam, and that the exercises aloft by a sailing fleet, such as Sir Wm. Parker commanded in the forties, were a small matter compared to those instituted in the "Marlborough" under the splendid auspices of the present Admirals, Sir Wm. Martin, Sir Houston Stewart and Sir Thomas Brandreth in the sixties.

But however all this may be, there has been for a couple of centuries a body of men serving afloat, second to none as loyal fighting men, with whom it was a traditional privilege that they could not be ordered "above the hammock-nettings." Since the earliest times the proud position of the marines was to mess and to sleep between the blue-jackets and the officers. And even now, when the loyalty of marines and blue-jackets is equal,

and is preserved by the same means, tradition puts the marine to mess and to sleep in as good an imitation of his old place as modern naval architecture will allow. This body of men got few advantages, moral or physical from the use of sails, and so far, the marine of to-day, when sail has gone, cannot differ much from the marine of a hundred years ago.

Steam brought in a second body of men who were free from training aloft, and who by the nature of the case could hold no competition as athletes with the upper yardmen, though to some extent the nature of their work below brought the operation of mind and muscle into nearly as close an alliance as did that of the upper yardmen aloft. These men, the stokers, were so noted for their muscular power that in regattas it was generally allowed that the stoker's boats ought to win. The marine again was somewhat hampered by the general buttoned-up-ness of his dress. The stoker dressed as a seaman, and enjoyed all the splendid freedom of limb which the seaman's dress offers behind its picturesque and graceful outline.

Thus the evolution of the blue-jacket may be more direct from him of the last century than from him of the time when there was a contest between coal and wind for the right to propel and when it was not certain which would win. The blue-jacket proper has diminished in comparative number. The absence of sail has brought him towards the marine; his dress and much of his training and mode of life leave him less distinguished than heretofore from the stoker. In another way, the difference between the stoker and the blue-jacket proper is minimized. All that working in hemp and canvas; knotting, splicing, grafting, pointing, worming, sewing, tabling, and all the hundred and one manufacturing operations of the blue-jacket as a handicraftsman, have disappeared. There was a certain character about all hemp and canvas handicraftsmanship which certainly must have had its effect on the character of the handicraftsman. It was never exact work. A job might be a neat job of work or it might be a rough one, yet the work as work was equally good.

The seaman could put some of himself into the seizing of every block he stropped, into the end of every rope he pointed. That is all gone. He is not yet a mechanic; he is not yet a worker in brass and iron as he was once in hemp and canvas, but he is constantly handling mechanisms so exactly formed that

no part of the former is left in them. There is no individuality in the things he handles; they are impassive and impersonal.

And then again he has wholly lost that sense of contention with the elements, that romantic uncertainty which lay in the doubt whether, in the sailing ship, man or nature would win in any contest. The character of a man perpetually wondering whether nature would be kind and blow him into the haven where he would be, or whether nature would be rough and give him a week's dose of treble-reefed topsails to a dead foul breeze, could not possibly embrace the same characteristics as that of him who spends his life in feeling and asserting his entire mastery over the elements, and his perfect indifference to the freaks of wind or sea.

So this, the ideality of the blue-jacket, his romance, his individualism, has been roughly assaulted by the advent of steam and the number and exactitude of the mechanisms which steam has developed, and which are the daily and hourly companions of his life afloat.

Only two sorts of work remain to the blue-jacket into which he can put his personality, or on which he can stamp his character. In as far as he makes his own clothes, washes them, and scrubs his own hammock, he is doing work which is not exact, and into which his energy, or the want of it, his fancy, or the want of it, may enter. It is to be hoped that the contractor for slop clothing may be kept as much at arm's length as possible, and that the pipe, "Scrub 'ammicks and wash clothes," may not become obsolete on the advent of some terrible inventor who proposes to do the business by steam.

But on the other hand, seaman, marine, and stoker lead on board ship now a life not differing so very much from that which their forefathers so lived. The absence of privacy; much of the crowding; the habit of doing hour by hour, like the works of a clock, hosts of disagreeable things only because some one else has ordered them to be done; all these remain to form the physique and the character, and to stamp their peculiarities on each of the three great branches of the naval service. The very long, solitary cruises of men-of-war have passed away in our own time, yet many of our smaller ships are for months isolated, cut off from all civilization except their own, when their lot is cast in distant and unfrequented parts of the world; so that whatever effect this separation had in the past is not wholly lost in the present. And,

quite apart from everything which was or is peculiar to the blue-jacket's situation on board ship as contrasted with that of the marine and the stoker, we know for certain that ship life leaves a special stamp upon him. We know it because of the special stamp it leaves on the marine. Admittedly there are no troops in the world like the Royal Marines. Besides the peculiar steadiness and solidity which they exhibit, their capacity for making themselves comfortable under the most adverse circumstances of a campaign has long been the envy of the pure soldier. In this the blue-jacket shares equally, and the fact shows that it is inherent in ship life to produce this sort of thing, and that the change to steam has not affected it. I have had occasion to follow some of the early history of the Sherwood Foresters, late the Forty-fifth Regiment, and I have traced in it most of the characteristics now so marked in the marines. The regiment had such an extraordinarily prolonged experience of life in transports, that when several regiments were under convoy, those carrying the Forty-fifth were held up as the patterns which other regiments should copy in order, cleanliness and comfort.

But if the blue-jacket has much changed, and I think he has, generally for the better, it is law and rule that has done it and not so much physical surroundings.

Though I have said that the average is not represented in our pictures of the blue-jacket of a past age, I should paint that average, as I knew it, in sadder colors than I could now use. The average blue-jacket as I knew him long ago was always a good fellow, but you seldom knew where to have him. He was unquestionably a drunken fellow, and he used to manage to get dead drunk faster than any other class of men with whom I have been acquainted. He was not steady. Apart from his officer he seemed almost a reed shaken with the wind, though his personal courage was always lion-like when roused. He was proud of his officer, especially if the officer was hard on him. He was somewhat of a fatalist, quick to imagine that fate was against him and to give up the struggle against it. He was quarrelsome in his cups, but almost always distinctly witty out of them. He preserves his humor to the present day. A story is told of a certain "Bill" standing at the corner of a street in Natal during the Zulu war, when a certain general just landed, covered with medals and orders, and equally hung with soldierly knickknacks,

the whistle, the field glass, the compass, the note book, etc., passed near "Bill" and his companion "Jack."

"Who's 'im, Jack?" asked Bill.

"Dunno," said Jack, "seems to be one o' them new generals just come ashore."

"H'm," returned Bill, preparing to put his pipe in his mouth again, "looks like a bloomin' Christmas tree!"

The stories about frying watches, and lighting pipes with £5 notes, give an utterly false notion of the blue-jacket. Philip, drunk, might have done such things, but not Philip, sober. Philip, sober, has always been, and is, peculiarly sharp and thrifty about money. Philip, sober, forty or fifty years ago took wonderful care of the pence, and he does so still. But forty or fifty years ago he was filled with an ignorant suspicion of every one who had to do with his money and who did not play upon his fancies. He has got over that now perhaps pretty well, but no one of his rank of life makes closer calculations or drives a better bargain than the developed blue-jacket of to-day. I think he has overdone it in not meeting Government half way on the score of his widow's pension, but he is the descendant of tradition and Rome was not built in a day.

His thrift has been in every way helped by wise legislation in the matter of naval savings banks, in the frequency of his payments, and in the facilities given him when abroad for remitting to his friends and dependents at home. To these he is almost uniformly generous. I give some figures which show both his thrift and his generosity, or care for his family.

A certain battleship, in the year 1893, with a complement of less than 500 blue-jackets, marines, and stokers, sent home by means of regular monthly allotments to relatives, dependents, and friends, more than £4,700. At odd times, as they had it to spare, they remitted a further sum of over £900. This was generous thrift, exercised toward others. If further inquiries had been made it would be shown that many of the remitters, and more of those who were not remitting, were hoarding in the savings banks. In 1892-3, 17,934 men in the navy had savings bank accounts open, and the total amount thus hoarded was £229,173, an average of more than £12 per head of depositors, or perhaps nearly £4 per head of the men serving. The sum actually put away that year was over £173,000.

I have said that in old times he was a drunken fellow ; but then we were all drunken fellows a hundred years ago. I have seen the journal of the captain of a frigate written in the West Indies during the War of Independence. He had flogged a man for drunkenness, and the man in the course of his punishment said the captain himself had been drunk a couple of days before. The man, according to the custom of those times, got another dozen. But the captain, narrating the occurrence in his journal, reflected that after all the man had spoken the truth. The wise conclusion of the captain thereon was "that he would never get drunk *on board the ship* again."

When I throw my mind back forty years to the days when I served in what was called "a twelve-gun pelter"—that is, a man-of-war brig—it seems to me as if, just outside of the midshipman's berth, which was then my domicile, there were always two or three drunken men lying on the deck with their legs in irons and their heads on wet "swabs"—bundles of rope yarns which were used in drying the decks after washing. And, showing how we then regarded such matters, it is the comic side of the scene which alone dwells in my mind. I have a remembrance of a certain Thompson, a carpenter's mate, waking up, half recovered, and prefacing a long soliloquy on the injustice of the commander in speaking of him as "the man, Thompson," by quoting Shakespeare, "Now is the winter of our discontent." Turtle, when taken on board ship as fresh meat, are laid on their backs with a wet swab under their heads. I remember a certain Lear, captain of the foretop, recognizing the similarity of his position, and in his more than half-drunken state declaring that "he didn't want no wet swabs ; he wasn't a ——— turtle !"

I deem it quite possible that the blue-jacket of this date was more drunken on board his ship than was his ancestor of a century earlier. The ancestor was brought up on beer ; my blue-jacket was brought up on rum. Every day he had a large wine-glass full of rum to three wine-glasses full of water at his noon-tide dinner, and again at his afternoon tea. Often he did not drink it, but handed his proportion to the messmate, whose turn it was to enjoy the glories of getting thoroughly drunk with a possible flogging to follow. The only directly repressive measure against this sort of thing was taken many years ago, when the evening basin of grog ceased to be served out. The opportunities of get-

ting drunk on board were lessened, but those on shore were immensely increased.

In nothing was the blue-jacket of early days more unreliable than in his return from leave on shore. The thing acted and re-acted. The rarity of his visits to the land made him stay there when he got there, as long as he could. Because he was sure to over-stay, he was seldom allowed the opportunity. But the wisest of legislation cut the gordian knot. Many years ago the dwellers on the lower deck of all ranks, were classed for leave. There are "special," "privileged" and "general," "leave-men," and there are "habitual leave-breakers." The "special" leave man goes ashore almost as the officer does—whenever he wishes, and the duties of the ship admit of it. The "privileged" man goes when time is not likely to press much. The "general" leave-man only goes at stated intervals and when time does not press at all. The "habitual leave-breaker" only goes at long intervals and to test his powers of returning to time experimentally. The result, of course, is immensely increased opportunities of getting drunk on shore, but immense pressure to keep sober so as not to lose a "class" in leave, or to get a step higher in the classification. And in every ship, and always, the good lesson is working and the evolution of the blue-jacket is towards sobriety and reliability.

There are in every ship some total abstainers. Those who look for a new heaven and a new earth as the outcome of total abstention may be inclined to regard them as stars in the firmament. But generally speaking, I think I am right in saying that the executive officers do not know who, amongst the well-behaved and the exemplars on the lower deck are total abstainers, and who are moderate drinkers. Most naval officers reckon more with the ill effect of broken vows, than with the good effect of vows that are kept. They do not favor the teetotal propaganda, and believe more fully in that which they see; namely, the silent growth of that public opinion on the lower deck which has for so many years been dominant on the quarter-deck.

What shall we say of the courage and loyalty of the present blue-jacket? We may say then there never was greater trial of it than was recently made in the Soudan, and it never had a more magnificent triumph. All the blue-jackets' fighting of late has been on shore, and probably there are no light troops in

the world such as those we land from our ships. Speed of movement, steadiness, reliability, daring of the highest quality, are all there, and evolution in this respect has been towards perfection.

What again of his loyalty and discipline? There is in this respect no difference now between the seaman and the marine. Both are long-service men generally looking forward to their pensions. Both have a great stake in the success and maintenance of the naval service. Discipline for these reasons seldom requires the iron hand. The causes which differentiated the officer from the man have to some extent ceased to operate. The man feels, as the officer has longer felt, that he is the subject of law and not of personal will. He is more ready than he was to fill his place in the general machinery.

But I hope I am wrong in apprehending a possible danger. If personal interest alone had been the guide of the naval officer, England would scarcely be where she is. The sentiment of loyalty, and of the grandeur of self-sacrifice for a cause, have made the British naval officer what self-interest alone could never have made him. There have been some signs that on the lower deck this sentiment does not wax. The discipline and loyalty based upon self-interest and utilitarianism may be perfect in appearance and yet incapable of bearing a strain. If anything of the trades-union spirit should invade our lower decks, there might be danger in it.

P. H. COLOMB.